A Cabin in the Country

By Ryan Alcorn

Swallow it down. Go on, swallow it. Good.

The summer morning spreads a pleasant warmth over the

uninterrupted countryside and into our cabin. I built this cabin – created it

with my own two hands – just for you, you know. Oh, the sorrow that

troublesome news brought me.

Outside, birds sing harmoniously. I keep your bed right underneath

the window, letting their songs warm your heart and the sunlight warm your

covers. Sunlight always cheers you. I can't neglect your health, but it is

just as important that you are jovial during such sickness.

I shall always be here for you, love you honestly and sincerely. I'll be

here to wipe your face – laden with sweat – dry when you need it. Your

heavily-controlled breathing flows in and out of your body so tenderly, so

delicately, you poor thing.

It was terribly courageous of you to go behind my back like that.

Somehow, you never caught on to my friend I was having follow you. It

really is such a shame that you're here like this now. You seemed so

perfect, and now you'll be kept to your bed. Here, with me at your side,

unable to leave this cabin, unable to return to town or to your friend.

So drink up, my dearest. Swallow it all.

The Long Road Out

(Inspired by the Long Road Out of Eden album by The Eagles)

Ryan Alcorn

I

*Piercing white light.*

*Howling wind.*

*Scorching sand.*

*A splitting headache.*

II

As the unearthly pain in my skull calmed and the edge of the Earth dimmed the Sun, my surroundings finally took on a definite shape: Desert. Sand for eternity in every direction, broken up in places by dark, malnourished weeds that could hardly be called plants. In every direction

but one, at least. Behind me, the brilliant gates of Eden stood, bordered by marble and

crafted from gold. I didn't need to try to enter. I knew all too well that the gates were locked – no doubt since the moment the doors closed behind me. And besides: They didn't want me, so I certainly didn't want them. I lifted my sore frame upright from the partial bed of rigid weeds, and in the deep red and purple glow of the sunset, I spotted a patch of sand raised above the area around it. Staring at it a moment longer, I realized that it continued for as far as I could see. A road. Hardly noticeable by any standard, but there. I could follow it, or rot where I sat. Not a difficult choice.

III

I hadn't taken note of the Moon until it dipped into my peripheral vision on the far side of its arc across the sky. I chuckled when I noticed an odd coincidence: The Moon's path seemed to run parallel to the road. As the sand swallowed any echoes that could have come from my laughter, a sense of familiarity lurched into my stomach. Memories that had long been forgotten within the gates of Eden returned slowly, only as vague shadows at first. Something didn't make sense.

How could it all be desert? I had been out here for years before that meeting in the woods. The more I tried to remember, the more clearly I recalled that rolling hills and sprawling fields once stood where dunes of sand now warped and wandered. When I was ignorant to the existence of such a place as Eden, everything was beautiful and full of life. I would wake to the songs of the finches and be lulled to sleep by the crickets, frogs, and owls. I remembered picking sweet, succulent fruit from

the trees; pulling fish from the creeks and cooking them under the light of the Moon. As I continued through more memories, I truly began to remember.

IV

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello,” she responded.

This wasn't something that had happened before. The few people I did see never strayed from the road, much less came out to this grove – something I'd always found curious, given its beauty. But surely enough, there was a breathtaking woman in an elaborate, flowing dress in the grove. We spoke for a time, and the minutes became hours without either of us noticing. I learned that she was from a wondrous place called Eden, and that she had come to this grove because her curiosity had finally gotten the best of her, despite what her people had told her about what lay beyond the edge

of the road.

“You should come back with me,” she said.

I explained that I couldn't, and I told her of my duties to the grove. I asked her to follow me.

As we neared the heart of the woods, I began examining the trees much more closely, and found what I needed to show her. On one tree, a group of black, bony vines crept up the trunk. “I come through here every day and clear out the Growth. It spreads wherever it can every night. Chokes out everything in its path. It would only take a couple of days for it to bring down a tree like this one.”

I reached for the spiked tip of one of the vines, pulled it back, and it snapped with a dry, sickening crack. Piece by piece, I broke off the rest of it, and proceeded to the others. Once I had finished and began to search another tree, the girl spoke again:

“Surely the trees have their own defenses. How else could they have survived before you came along?”

“The Growth hasn't always been here. It only showed up during the past

few years.” A mild tone of impatience entered her voice. “The trees can defend themselves. Come back to Eden with me.”

I turned to her to decline once more, but the eyes that met mine froze me in place and I fell silent. In the golden light, filtered by the leaves, her beckoning eyes glistened innocently in a face that could only be described as heartbroken. The trees faded from my thought, and we walked hand-in-hand to Eden.

V

I stood in the sand, paralyzed by what surrounded me. Shortly after the Sun had risen and set the world ablaze once more, I'd found what remained of the grove and couldn't keep myself away: A cluster of dead monoliths suffocated by arid obsidian tendrils. The trees fortunate enough to fall

criss-crossed the grounds I had once been responsible for; the rest were held firmly upright, only to serve as deformed mockeries of what had been. I collapsed onto the burning sand, shock making me immune to the searing pain. On my back, with my eyes locked on the sky, I waited.

VI

The Sun peaked overhead, burned my eyes. I did not shut them.

Gone. All dead.

Any semblance of hope had disappeared when I saw what I had allowed to happen. I knew I couldn't live – didn't deserve to live – with the blood of so much on my hands. The Sun continued its merciless glaring. A soft sifting noise began to my side, but my gaze never drifted from the undying light. Time lost meaning. Steely roots tightened themselves around my wrists.

Kill me. Take the last life. One more around each leg. Redeem me.

One last tentacle rose from the sand, looped itself over my throat and returned, tightened. The Sun's eternal glare began to fade.

And let this be the crumb that chokes you.

VII

In the blackness, somewhere in the thunderous pounding of my heartbeat, a bird chirped.

VIII

A nearly imperceptible snap. The pressure around my throat lifted a bit. Another, and a hot rush flowed up through my neck and into my temples. I gasped for breath, my skull throbbing warmly.

Slowly, I opened my eyes, finally realizing how much time had passed. The Sun had slipped beyond the horizon, and the Moon had already reached its peak and begun its descent.

Another chirp. I wearily lifted my head to find a small beige sparrow standing on my

chest. It stared at me, its head cocked in curiosity. It flitted to each of my limbs in turn and cut them. Satisfied with itself, it stood at my feet, watching me, waiting for me to move. After a few moments, my thoughts stopped spinning and I managed to stand. The sparrow hopped away from me, stopped, and turned. Only half-believing what I was seeing, I followed it back to the road. Saying nothing more, the bird took flight and glided in line with the road, in the direction of the falling Moon.

IX

The sparrow had managed to reawaken a small amount of hope within me. Out here, in the desert, something was still alive. And if there was a sparrow, could there be more? I walked for what could have been eternity, and as the Moon finally touched the horizon once again, I paused. Just on the edge of the world, a low, flat shape sat silhouetted against the silver disc.

There is more.

I pressed on.

X

In front of me, at the end of the road, city walls extended to infinity in either direction. Under the watchful Moon, light poured from over the walls and turned the nearby sand a gentle gold. An arch over the entrance read “Utopia.”

The gates stood wide open.

# Bloody Black Feathers by Kelli Hyre

I fell from the sky that morning, after being scolded and treated quite harshly by my heavenly master, and landed on repulsive artificial rock. After emerging from my minds disoriented haze, I became aware of my new surroundings, and it was quite obvious that He had sent me forward in time. Tall pointed and rectangular buildings stretched their glimmering necks to the heavens, and the stench of dirt and grime came from everywhere. I suppose He had sent me to *my* hell.

There were no others of my kind around that was clear. I was surrounded by crinkle-nosed humans who were neglecting their daily routines to stare and jeer at me nastily. I had done nothing wrong to these people, but I remembered hearing Him say how incredibly irritating and troublesome these sad creatures were. That was just another way this place was my hell.

“He fell right out of the sky.” The humans whispered among themselves, although their tone was jovial as if they found my sorrow and misfortune entertaining and frivolous. Were they really so desperate for a break from their lives conventionality that they would see such a broken and lost soul and do nothing but giggle? Was a game to them? I wondered as I stood and tried to dust myself off. He had given me human clothing, that I’m sure were white as snow at one point in time, but had been sullied by the filth of this forsaken city; and no matter how hard I tried to cleanse myself, I failed.

I began walking then, with the humans evil militant eyes following me all the way. I knew that they were unable to see my wings and know where I came from, but that didn’t prevent them from putting a barrier between them and me. I was different. An outcast from their world and my own, and honestly, I knew that I was just as unwanted here as I was there. There was no way this person and I could live harmoniously in this unstable and fickle world. I wandered on with my bare feet slapping against the cold ground that was no longer as He had created it long ago. The humans had ruined it with their filthy hands. It made me sincerely ill just being close to the ruin, but why did I care? I was nothing to him now; nothing but another fallen one.

I walked on, laden with regret, depression and self-disgust that swallowed me up more and more with every awful, lingering, apathetic step. I went through the frozen park until I came to a small pond where my pathetically sad image could stare back at me. My eyes were still as blue as a summer sky, but my hair was an ashen black with one streak of blonde still remaining, and my wings. My beautiful wings that were once as white and as feathered as clouds were now black as coal; a reminder of my sin.

I left the park then, with one deadly thing on my mind. I searched through trash and scrap-piles until I found a piece of sharpened metal that was the perfect size for my somber intentions. I then found myself back at the pond, staring at my disgrace, and then I proceeded to dig the scrap into my ruined feathery back, slicing through at the base.

And soon bloody black feathers pirouetted down in the chilly breeze, and then delicately rested on the cherry red snow.

**Move Like the Seasons**

**(Journal)**

She flows with life, like the spring rivers, keeping herself flexible until breaking like a crisp branch. She escapes the harsh winter only to be scorched by the unforgiving summer.

Her ever-changing mood resembles the weather, one second a raging downpour and another a gorgeous ray of light. Yet her stability, her flowers, remain positive. Winney, the ever-so-fragile lily, blooming the most beautiful places. Graine and Ursula, a buttercup and a tulip that refuse to sprout without the other. Even Icarus, disguised as some poison ivy or perhaps a thorn covered vine, could sometimes bud into a lovely rose.

So as the dark blue of winter bites at her or the temper of summer boils, her flowers root her down, holding her, grounding her, just so she might remain to sway once more like a gentle spring breeze lulling her beautiful garden to sleep.

By: Emily Rawles

**The Greenhouse**

The noise was a constant, heavy rhythm that sounded like the steady pulsing of a giant heart. The moist leaves, glossy with the settled mist, whispered together as hot air blew down upon them from an ancient, droning heater. It was far too warm in the dark greenhouse for comfort, the air so wet that it saturated the skin.

And all of the whispering told a tale of death.

From one corner came an aching moan, a mournful noise that made the leaves rustle anxiously. But no, then here he came; their keeper, their dear, dear master. Walking past the quivering plants, Lam looked forward firmly. His world was tilting dangerously, but in here, in his green house, he was home. It was his sanctuary. His ghostly reflections in the black glass shimmered as he continued, and with gentle faces he traced the patterns on leaves, leaving delicious tingles down their stalks. But he kept going until he reached the work table in the back with all of his tools. He examined the devices, gleaming under a harsh wash of greenish-white light. His skin, too, had taken on a pale, sickly tint from spending so long isolated with his plants, and they thought this a pity.

Originally, he’d had a long mane of golden locks, snarled and more beautiful than any flower. He had always been slight, but now there was an emaciated air about the master. Lam’s clothes were ripped at the knees, his boots darkly stained, and his glasses showed wide, terrified pools hiding behind the heavily scratched lenses.

Another whimper trickled out into the darkness and after jumping spastically he frowned deeply and adjusted his glasses. Then, after selecting a large pair of garden shears, he calmly began strolling through his humid, indoor jungle before disappearing behind a large, cave-like rhododendron. The plants leaned forward collectively to watch the spectacle, as Lam began to prune out the weeds of his sanctuary. A single, strangled cry started out, and then was hushed.

Soon, a new noise joined the roar of the heater and their whispers in the din of the greenhouse, a steady drip…drip…drip.

Lam reemerged from behind his tree and set his glasses straight once more. Holding the shears, now splashed merrily with crimson, he walked back to his table to set down the tool and turn off the light, and then shuffled into the heart of the vegetation where a small cot lay. He knelt down upon it and gazed up through the glass out into the rest of the world, and with a content sigh the darkness consumed Lam and his precious plants, and finally all was silence.

My Greenhouse

welcome to my greenhouse

welcome to my pain

it hides me from the insults

it hides me from the rain

the world is tinted muddy brown

but here they’re green instead

while i have to cope with strangers

here my hands can drop with red

if i close my eyes they whisper

telling me their secret lives

their troubles and their trembles

how they finally survived

there are little venus fly-traps

devils snare and dragon-snaps

these plants are all my only friends

who keep me company

a lovely little sprout budding into a cherry tree

i planted all these little friends

from little tiny seeds

protected them from parasites

unfriendlies and the weeds

now there’s a new space in the middle just for me

where i’ll plant myself

and keep myself

and finally be me

**By: Holly Roberts**

*A Crime To Burn Away*

By: Holly Roberts

The night was alive with the frenzy of nocturnal animals and the gentle rush of the leaves dancing together. An inky curtain made up the sky, and there were no stars to surround the orange moon. A fire was crackling through the darkness.

The world had ended two hours ago.

Xerxes sat numbly by the fire, staring into the heart of the flames. It was burning fiercely, and the radiating heat caused surrounding greenery to wither. He would not have minded the heat with his typically tough skin, but with his tuxedo, ripped and soaked with blood, discarded some ways back among the trees the cool wind was chilling. The man looked down at his hands, now raw and blistered after he had forced them onto the coals. His face and arms had suffered the same fate, and after more flaming rocks had been allowed to rest in Xerxes’ mouth his throat was cracking as small tendrils of live fire snaked down to his belly.

“This isn’t enough…” he whispered to the shadows, and the open wounds in his throat opened excruciatingly, forcing blood out. When he got done choking Xerxes continued to let guilt, a selfish emotion, surround the air like a fog. “This isn’t enough suffering…not by a long shot….”

Tears were falling now from his beautiful, golden eyes, stinging as they mixed with ashes. He could not remember the last time he had allowed himself to cry.

Sparks danced off the flames and landed on his bare legs, going unnoticed as they fell on flesh that was already burned. Smoke coated his eyes and filled his iron lungs, but Xerxes did not more. He stayed in a crouched position, scarlet and exposed to what might have been an empty world, trying to burn away the guilt that comes with unforgivable crimes.

And only then, with the crackling fire as his only companion, did he finally get up enough courage to mourn for his brother.

*This devilish man mentioned here is one of two original characters, probably my favorite out of my vault of creations. The tale of Xerxes and Cyrus is not a very happy one, as is obvious by this journal. The two brothers were born in the fictional town of Arsenic, and they have a troubled, violent history. A novella is in the works to tell their story. And as for the apparent death of Cyrus…it might not be what you think.*

**The Cardboard Castle**

By: Holly Roberts

Somewhere in the city, another clock chimed, signifying eleven. Light was spilling down from the streetlamps, washing the stretches of road with their sickly white light. In the blackness they were pools of illumination that nobody wanted to be a part of. All of the crawling creatures of the night, the creeping misfits that remained hidden in the shadows, avoided these paths of light, so that others would not see them, and so that they wouldn’t have to see themselves either.

The dump was a place that could either be described as glorious or horrible. In the darkness and the dirt there were treasures and trinkets that had been either lost or discarded, with bits of shining things flashing out into the night. More street lamps revealed mountains of trash all hovering together, and if you stood at the base of one you wouldn’t be able to see the top. The air was thick and impossibly heavy, the smell having as much of a presence as a person would, and there was nothing moving except the occasional clinking of something small and insignificant rummaging among the piles.

To the people outside, it was an odious place of waste and despair and all things untouchable.

“Nothing but trash in there,” they would say. But if they had taken a closer look, they would have seen something that would change them forever.

The castle towered above all of this, a wonderful thing at night and an even more beautiful one in the light. It was as magnificent as any mansion; it was simply not made of the same material. Essentially, it was cardboard, only with thousands of small pieces of trash adorning it. There were tall spires fencing with the sky, made of the legs of chairs. A line of bottle caps ran along the entire base of every floor and ceiling in the numerous rooms. Each little space was only the size of a closet, but that was all that was required: a small, safe little place. Most of the rooms were filled with supplies, things that would prove useful in any situation. There were rooms of string, and rooms of cloth and blankets. Many real valuables were ironically kept in what was considered a “shiny room”, and they housed many real riches that were special simply because they sparkled.

And then there was the garden, the castle’s crown jewel. There were hundreds of meticulously made flowers, some made of paper, some of wood or metal, and some were simply little blobs of chicken-wire with rocks to represent the centers. Glittering objects formed the middle of these flowers, and in the morning sunlight a dazzling kaleidoscope of colors danced off of them. The garden was a work in progress, with new blooms constantly popping up through the borrowed soil as the castle’s creator’s imagination swelled.

Salvaged shingles and pieces of tin had made a secure roof that otherwise would have leaked. Broken pieces of metal had been used to create a menacing fence around the length of the castle, and numerous tarps and sheets of plastic had been used to cover all of the surfaces of walls to keep the building from corroding. Anything broken had been fixed and was being used, with no expenses spared.

Pilar was standing tall in a tower made of a carved-out trash can, gazing up into the smeared blackness of the sky. She wasn’t looking for stars; there were never stars in the sky here, but instead she was looking at the moon, as beautiful and vibrant as a drop of blood falling through the air. Pilar could imagine what would happen when it finally fell, covering an already bloody town.

A scarecrow she was, with skin rough as thistles and a personality with the sharpness to match. A broken bottle’s edge was used to keep wire-stiff black hair manageable around an angular face with eyes like marbles. She came up to the bottom of the letters on the stop sign on the corner, and her body was pale as milk and emaciated, like a raven-haired skeleton. Defiance was her nature but survival was her job. Pilar was alone in her castle, and she had built it by herself as well, spending the countless hours joining piece after piece of garbage together until she had created something beautiful.

It was in there in her castle she had remained. And it was in this muffled state of night that it was just her and the moon, crisp and scarlet, staring endlessly at each other between the miles that separated them.